NOWletter 237 – June 2022 Website: www.capacitie.org

‘Politics begins as ethics’: Levinasian Ethics and Australian Performance concerning Refugees.

Tom Burvill, Macquarie University,Sydney

Introduction.

This paper discusses the dramaturgy of a selection of the diverse Australian theatre and performance work concerning refugee asylum-seekers in the light of Emmanuel Levinas’s radical concept of ethics. Levinas invokes an unconditional responsibility for the other, signalled by the epiphany of the encounter with the face of the other. For Levinas this traumatic encounter with alterity founds ethical subjectivity *as* responsibility. Especially during the period from late 2001 to 2004 Australian theatre produced an extraordinary array of performance responses to the refusal of generosity and hospitality, the denial of ethical responsibility involved in the Howard government’s policy towards refugee asylum-seekers. The extreme ‘border protection’ policy put in place, including mandatory, indiscriminate and indefinite detention including of asylum-seeker’s children were accompanied by a cynical xenophobic politics of encouraging ‘border panic’. Specific measures included the turning back of the MV Tampa and as well as the lies of the ‘children overboard’ affair and the exporting of our international obligations to struggling neighbour nations. In the notorious ‘Pacific Solution’ including the RAN Operation Relex ‘boat people’ were intercepted at sea by Navy vessels and taken to camps hastily constructed on the impoverished island of Nauru and other places. This effectively meant they had no access to the Australian legal system to pursue claims for refugee asylum status in this country. This policy may

be implicated in the tragedy of the loss of the refugee vessel, the so-called SIEV X.[1] Again, even more effectively than those detained onshore the victims of the Pacific Solution were 'out of sight, out of mind' for the majority of the Australian population. Louis Joinet, of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared that 'a system (such as practised in Australia) combining mandatory, automatic, indiscriminate and indefinite detention (of refugee asylum –seekers) without real access to court challenge is not practised by any other country in the world.'

The productions created in response to this situation adopted a variety of performance strategies but shared a broad politics of shame and outrage at what was being done 'in our name' by the government. I believe we will come to see this period of our theatre as unique, occurring in many sectors and many forms and genres but united by an unparalleled intensity of commitment. In their different ways these productions articulated an ethical approach to those who present themselves at our borders seeking refugee asylum. The productions I will discuss are only a sampling from the wide range of dramaturgical domains and cultural sectors involved. They include Sidetrack Performance Group's *Citizen X –Letters from Refugees* ; Hanny Rayson's *Two Brothers* ; refugee Shahein Shafei's solo piece *Refugitive* ; *CMI- A Certain Maritime Incident* by version 1.0 ; and *Purgatory Down Under* by Stephen Klinder and Jon Williams .

I use the term dramaturgy here to refer in the widest sense to the ensemble of performance strategies deployed in these productions. This includes the use of verbatim or fictionalised verbal content, narrative or non-narrative structure, representational or more metaphoric approaches, forms of characterisation and importantly, the ways these elements relate to the audience and performance context. However diverse in form, I see all these shows as interventions impelled by ethical outrage at what is (still) being done 'in our name' by the Howard Government. As responses to the denial of refugees' human rights they are attempts to assume some of the responsibility for the Other shrugged off by the Government's cynical policies and to encourage that assumption of responsibility in their audiences. My argument about the Australian work I am concerned with is that it was not so much concerned with ideological as with affective transformations in its audience. These shows therefore constituted a performance of ethics in themselves, they were striving to be forms of ethical practice. In various ways they constituted attempts to take up the 'unassumable responsibility' for the Other hyperbolically enunciated by Levinas and were in that sense political. The various forms of refugee performance represent different solutions to the problem of the ethical in these circumstances.

Levinasian Ethics.

Dissatisfied with philosophy's preoccupation with being and essence –its occlusion of our relation with others-- Levinas argues that philosophy is first ethics and that ethics involves an openness to the face of the other and a responsibility for the Other. Indeed, he speaks of this

[1] This story is too complex and too important to the ethics and politics of Australian Government policy for me to adequately summarise here. Readers are directed to Tony Kevin's careful account in his *A Certain Maritime Incident- the sinking of SIEV X.* Kevin also provides a brief summary in his introductory essay 'Political Facts' to Hannie Rayson's play *Two Brothers.*

responsibility as 'the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity'. In Levinas' words:

Positively we will say that since the other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even taking on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me…To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that's it…. The face orders and ordains me…I employ this extreme formulation. (Levinas 1985, 95-96)

In this simple gesture of individual response-ability to the face of the other, the ethical relation is born. Ethics for Levinas involves 'the putting into question of the self by the infinitising mode of the face of the other' (Robbins 1999, xiii). Levinas is fond of reinforcing the absolute character of this responsibility, by quoting Dostoyevsky's formulation in *The Brothers Karamazov*; that 'We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others'.

Moreover, the epiphany of the face and the discourse to which it gives rise 'attests to the presence of the third party, of humanity as a whole, in the eyes that look at me': 'It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign…that constitutes the original fact of fraternity.' (Levinas 1979, 213) In Levinas formulation ethics is inextricably bound up with the political. In Simon Critchley's words: 'The ethical relation does not take place in an a-political space outside the public realm; rather, ethics is always already political, the relation to the face is always already a relation to humanity as a whole.' (Critchley 1992, 226)

The concept of ethics elaborated by Levinas is a radical one, in the sense of claiming a foundational place in the concept of the self, of subjectivity. This is of course not a traditional form of ethics. It has been called 'ethics as first philosophy'. In this form of 'ethics' the I comes into being in the encounter with the other – our subjectivity is based on making the Other the very horizon of our being, whereas in more traditional ethical schemes, there is a pre-existing code which determines whether one is acting ethically or unethically and an assumption of an 'I' with some agency to decide which path to follow. Levinas makes clear that it is not only what he calls the 'destitute other', the other who cannot claim on us except morally or ethically, to and for whom we are in fact responsible. However, it is through our response to the Other that we are connected to what he calls the 'third', to society itself. In this way his ethics is based on a form of universality, the universality Levinas sometimes refers to as 'human fraternity'. In the situation of the refugees, the basic and ethically unavoidable responsibility is for generosity and hospitality, a responsibility grossly and explicitly denied by present policies of the Australian Government.

Levinas says that it is the encounter with the 'face' of the other in which we experience the infinite and transcendent alterity. My understanding of this is that while not at all metaphorical, the idea of the 'encounter with the face' invokes this experience as a way to express the immediacy, the non-negotiable radicality of the experience of the ethical encounter with the Other in the other, the way that experience in fact actually calls us into existence as subjects, interpellates us *as* ethical subjects, collapsing the scales of the infinite and the intimate together.

The problem of actually encountering the actual face of the refugee Other is acutely part of the Australian dilemma. One key aspect of the current Government policy is not only to exclude asylum-seekers from normal social interaction in the desert camps and off-shore detention centres,

but to forbid media circulation of 'humanising' images of individual detainees, a policy which keeps people 'faceless' in all but exceptional instances. In a highly visual and mediatised society, not to have media images of something is for it not to be quite real. We have images of the camps at a distance, of guards and barbed wire, all signifying imprisonment and implying criminality in those interned therein, but no access to the faces of the detainees.

In a compilation of conversations with artist and theorist Brache Lichtenberg-Ettinger printed to co-incide with an exhibition of her photo-works , *What would Eurydice say?* Levinas comments: "In the relationship to the face, in the encounter of two human beings before the other, the instant I see him I am already indebted to him. In Yiddish there is a nice way of saying it.... "I just laid eyes on him and already I owe him something... (Laughing)". Brache: 'as a human being, you recognise your debt for my past and […] as a human being, I recognise my debt for your future? Levinas: yes one can't live that all the time, but yes this is the heart of human ethics." (Ettinger 1997 ,22)

I believe we may take Levinas' injunction to assume the 'unassumable responsibility' for the other, for all others, to enjoin a state of mind, a readiness of openness to alterity. We may be able to take it, as indicating a basic affect, a 'comportment towards the Other' almost literally an embodied habit of openness, rather than a set of specific rules for ethical action, including ethical art – making.

This becomes significant when we begin to look for traces of the Levinasian ethical in specific work. It is not so much the characters' struggle with moral dilemmas, central to the traditions of serious European drama, that is the issue here. It is more a matter of how the experience of 'being there' interpellates the audience, what it 'does to you' to be present at the event of the performance, in terms of the encounter with alterity.

Levinas: Art as substitution versus 'the Saying and the Said'.

In this section I will look briefly at the issue of Levinas' distrust of art. However, my main concern in this section will be with his valorisation of what he calls 'the saying' (as opposed to 'the said') as rupturing totalising forms of discourse. My argument is that the forms Australian refugee theatre took in the period under consideration functioned as Levinasian ethical interventions in the Australian polis. I will further argue that his articulation of 'the saying' as an ethical form of discourse is particularly appropriate to our understandings of performance.

Jill Robbins in her work on Levinas and literature points out that at various times Levinas expresses an objection to art, understood as mimetic representation or what he calls 'substitution'. In his early work he sees the attempt to 'represent' the face of the other as fundamentally an obstacle to the embodied response to the Other which initiates the ethical encounter, the encounter which founds sociality and ethics. He sees art in this form as a dangerous substitution of an image for the face itself. This substitution is a form of sovereign knowing of the Other which does not call my own subjectivity into question and which substitutes the image for the face-to –face

encounter. Robbins claims that the theoretical stance in the early essay , 'Reality and its Shadow', is that art is by nature un-ethical, that "art is a kind of irresponsibility, that it is a kind of death ,an idolatry'. Indeed Robbins cites Levinas writing even in the major later work *Totality and Infinity* that; " The whole possibility, indeed the very temptation ,of violence is inscribed in the face's presentation as form or image: 'The contours of its form in expression imprisons this openness (which breaks up form) in a caricature. The face is at the limits of holiness and caricature'(TI198). In short, the analogy suggests that no aesthetic approach to the face could also be ethical. There is no ethical image of the face; there is no ethical image.' (Robbins,83-84).

However, there is another side to this question. It seems to me that performance, as embodied and interactive event, as processual practice unfolding with the co-presence of its spectators and actors in real time, need not be subject to Levinas' objection here. This type of performance, perhaps performance qua performance, may be thought of as of inter-active human discourse, a form of what Levinas calls 'the Saying' rather than perhaps the more purely representational 'Said'. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction* Simon Critchley argues that in Levinas "the Saying is my exposure-corporeal, sensible- to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach. It is the performative stating, proposing, or expressive position of myself facing the Other. It is a verbal or non-verbal ethical performance whose essence cannot be caught in constative propositions. It is a performative doing …" (Critchley, 1992,7) Critchley continues, "The saying is the sheer radicality of human speaking, of the event of being in relation to an Other; it is the non-thematisable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts philosophy ,and is the very enactment of the ethical movement from the Same to the Other.(Critchley, 1992,7)"

The hint that we might take to help us to identify the Levinasian ethical in performance practice here is the reference to the performative in the sense of the 'sheer radicality of human speaking'. We might add to that the suggestions of ethicity to be found in speech that foregrounds the relationship to the addressee, which is verbal or non-verbal ethical *performance* and is in that sense more a saying than (the repetition of) a said. Again, the reference to the 'event' of the ethical encounter suggests something embodied, something that happens, something in that sense performative.

What we might call a truly Levinasian performance would not be so much a discourse upon ethics or a demonstration of ethical behaviour (although it might include those things) as it would be a provocation or invitation to an experience of the ethical encounter with alterity, embodying the enactment of that 'unassumable responsibility'. This is again not so much about knowledge of the other, or information about their situation, (although in practice in the political context this might help to make the possibility of the ethical encounter) as is about the ethical quality of the experience itself , about a certain kind of affect. It is not perhaps even about, in the first instance, empathy or sympathy with the other, as these forms of relationship may be more about seeing in the other what is like oneself (what Levinas calls the Same).It is perhaps something more purely embodied than that, less explicit.

The more purely Levinasian performance then might not be so much about "representing" the ethical, as attempting to make possible ethical encounters with alterity, and these can be between the audience and a performative otherness. This encounter with an alterity, which Levinas

repeatedly expresses in terms of the encounter with the face of the other, is the baseline, as it were, the foundation of ethical human interaction. Rather than reinforcing the way is the other is the same (as the I, as 'us'), this encounter with alterity is about difference. Rosalind Diprose in her paper "The hand that writes community in blood" writes; "the difference community lives from is the other's difference that I cannot grasp but that initiates my movement towards the other and towards the world". Levinas, for example, puts this difference in terms of the other's alterity that "initiates the handshake" of sociality. The other's alterity (apart from any particular expression or interpretation of difference that this alterity may inspire) catches me, affects me, cuts me, and opens me to the other and the world [...] This relation to alterity, the hand extended to the other, *is corporeal and affective:* it is *the strangeness of others that I feel, rather than anything that I recognise, judge, or understand*, that moves me to act and speak in the first place and, so, opens me to the other. And this affective response to the other is also where both signification and ethics originate." (My emphasis) (Diprose, 2003, 40)

We might be able to suggest that at least some modes or moments of performance have some of this character. We might take the hint to search for those forms or moments of performance in which on the one hand the face of the other was not simply represented or mimetically pictured or imaged (which might be like a visual version of the Said) but where a relationship or connection with the other or perhaps with otherness itself in various guises, was transitively created.

AUSTRALIAN INTERVENTIONS

I want to indicate how a sample of productions from different genres dealt with the ethical challenge of the refugee issue. In each case it seems to me the dramaturgical solution was deeply conditioned by the specific context of performance. I believe this is consistent with them as pieces designed to encourage that genuine engagement with asylum-seekers.

In a very interesting essay in ***Borderlands***, Paul Miller applies a Levinasian perspective to the lies told by the government over the 'children overboard' incident. Miller asks,' How might the discourse around the children overboard affair have been different if one adopted a Levinasian understanding of ethics and the logic of hospitality and un-assumable responsibility?" Pertinently for our purposes here, Miller proposes that; ''50.[…] Levinas's philosophy demands a primacy be given to the recognition of the other as an absolute Other calling for hospitality. In relation to the asylum seekers, this change in affect would have totally resituated the problematic, not so much by telling us what we should have done, but by ruling out any response that came totally from a position of sovereign self interest whether individually or as a nation. At a minimum it would have required a genuine engagement with these asylum seekers as people rather than as simply 'invaders'. In what follows I argue that a number of Australian productions demonstrated a broadly Levinasian ethical approach to the possibilities of performance as a form of response to the refugees.

The productions I will now briefly discuss represent significantly different dramaturgical domains .I will begin with *CMI-A Certain Maritime Incident* .I will also discuss Sidetrack Performance Group's *Citizen X –Letters from Refugees* (a poetic weaving together of passages from actual

letters voiced by multi-ethnic cast); Hanny Rayson's *Two Brothers* (a quasi-naturalistic political thriller written for the mainstream); ex-refugee Shahein Shafei's solo piece *Refugitive* (a portable autobiographical hallucinatory monologue of detention experience) and *Purgatory Down Under* (a surreal satirical comedy of guards and detainees in an imaginary detention centre).

CMI –Two Levinasian moments.

CMI- A Certain Maritime Incident by version 1.0 is a postmodernist verbatim theatre deconstruction of the Australian Senate enquiry into the 'children overboard' scandal. In it I want to isolate two 'moments' as perhaps embodying the Levinasian Saying. I am thinking here of the creation in the moment of performance not so much of a specific attitude to any specific others, but of that foundational 'encounter' with alterity which Levinas invokes as fundamental to ethical subjectivity. In *CMI-A Certain Maritime Incident* the carnivalising verbatim replay of the constative and authoritative "Said" of the formal evidence of military men and bureaucrats to the Senate inquiry, was framed by the two passages of performance which had essentially a metaphorical and poetic mode of interpellating the spectator.

These were first the way that the audience entering the performance space was forced to negotiate a path over and between the naked bodies of the performers laid out mute and corpse-like on the floor of the entry way. This could not be clearly thematised or interpreted by audience members at that moment. The situation had first of all to be physically negotiated-one wanted to go in, one did not want to step on the performers nor really to invade their privacy by looking at them, but it was necessary to look down at them to get through. The passage of experience involved was obscure and mysterious in terms of signification (who, why?), but directly affecting in terms of a chilling confrontation with images of watery death. By the time we got to the closing passage of the performance we could give this horror a name-the the sinking of the refugee boat known as the SIEV X. This tragedy is Australia's worst ever maritime disaster. It involved the death by drowning of 358 hapless refugees, men, women and children whose unseaworthy vessel sank somewhere between Indonesia and Australia, in a patrol zone intensively under surveillance by the Australian Navy by radar and satellite. The mystery is how it was that neither satellite surveillance nor Navy ships on patrol noticed this event in time and the Navy only came on the scene to rescue survivors long after. The Australian government has steadfastly refused to hold an enquiry into the involvement of the Australian Navy, but testimony at the CMI Senate enquiry raised the question of a link to the Government's policy of using the Navy to repulse refugee vessels while still on the high seas. The CMI audience's encounter with this horror was constructed of three elements. The narration of a survivor of the sinking of the refugee ship was presented through a computer conditioned voice speaking the testimony of a surviving mother who had seen her husband and children taken by sharks and drowned. At the same time, we saw projections of a featureless and endless ocean while a single male actor's naked body not representing a specific person's body but suggesting a corpse was seen on stage being cleaned and prepared for burial.

By framing the exposure of what David Williams of version 1.0 calls the 'theatre of nonsense' of the Senate inquiry process itself in all of its surreal mundaneity the show attempted to reconnect us with an atrocity which the whole process of the actual inquiry itself had desperately tried to

push to the margins or out of sight altogether. Perhaps in this case not seeing an imitation of, a representation of in any literal sense, of the face of that infinitely suffering other was however more like an encounter with its alterity.

Refugitive is a one-man show written and performed by Iranian refugee playwright and actor Shahin Shafaei .The piece is a recreation and reflection on the surreal quality of the refugee in detention and the absurdity of the actions of Immigration officials and detention camp life in general. There is a pervasive sense of melancholy in the piece that speaks of a very general condition and a sadness borne of direct experience. Shafaei was detained in the Curtin detention centre for 22 months from June 2000 to February 2002, much of the time in solitary confinement. Finally, he was determined to have a valid claim to refugees' status and was granted a TPV (temporary protection visa). Shanin Shafaei is a classically trained Iranian actor .He performs the show on a bare stage, with only a mattress and a blanket for props. Using the blanket he transforms himself into different detainee figures and into two authority figures, the official from DIM IA (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) and the ACM (Australian Correctinal Management) manager. *Refugitive* is set in a cell in the isolation or punishment wing of the Curtin detention centre, known as the "India" compound. The central figure is an asylum seeker known as "The Man". As a portable one-man show *Refugitive* was able to be performed in any hall or meeting room requiring only a small amount of available floor as the playing area. This portability meant that Shafei was invited to perform in scores of both theatre and non-theatre community settings to all kinds of audiences including in many rural settings with initially hostile or sceptical audiences. Shafei has pointed out that some of these hostile audiences actually provided the best opportunities to debate the issues-and make vital contact with people who were in fact responding, albeit with anger. In Levinasian terms, even an angry response is a response, an encounter with alterity, much better than a refusal to engage. An after–show discussion was part of the presentation. As the sole performer, writer and the person who had undergone the experiences relived in the piece, Shafei was always ready to respond and expand on what audiences knew or believed about asylum-seekers. This he regarded as a crucial part of the efficacy of the performance. It seems to me that this form of face-to-face encounter not simply with the represented conditions of detention and its psychological consequences for detainees, but also with the responsive and interactive intelligent maker of the show ,willing to answer and respond in turn to responses, inherently increases the likelihood of ethical engagement with the issue of hospitality to the refugee.

The eloquent presence of the actual body of the former detainee, who was in fact at that time living on "borrowed time" in his status as a "temporarily protected" refugee, grounds the performance strongly not only in personal testimony, but indeed in presence, in the corporeal face-to -face. The moments of comedy in the portrayal of the officials, give a hint of the absurdity of the situation is encountered in mandatory detention, and Shahin Shafaei's adaptation physically to the grotesques of the DIMIA and ACM buffoons enacts the resilience of his sense that in a surreal world he still sees what is absurd and has not become the abject victim that the authoritarians seek to make him. The performers own melancholy, dignity and physical grace as The Man, especially the image of dignity in a solitary confinement cell evokes pity and anger in the audience certainly but filtered through a renewed sense of the immanence of human value, the value of the human itself.

Citizen X –letters from refugees

Citizen X by Sidetrack Performance Group was woven together from letters from a number of refugees, in that way continuing that quiet ethical form of activism which consists of establishing correspondence with particular detainees. *Citizen X.*, in "making public" the letters as part of a new text perhaps creates a third kind of space, a space in which the directness of testimony, of "bearing witness" in that direct and interpersonal way is reclaimed for an audience representing not the original personal addressee, but the social collectivity. The dramaturgy the Sidetrack show adopted did not try to turn the material from letters into narrative but rather took a haunting poetic form, as voices and themes rose and fell. The three actors did not attempt to impersonate the letter writers, but as it were to deliver their message, often an imploring one, very often a sad and desperate one, usually couched in imperfect English which betrayed the signs of laborious work with a dictionary. Amazingly few of the letters are angry and accusatory, and many are eloquent in surprisingly lyrical ways. Perhaps because of this surprisingly unaggressive character of the letters, the show also includes the extremely confronting and accusatory verbatim testimony of a female Australian nurse who has served in the detention centres, delivered straight to the audience with painful force.

In the original Sidetrack production each of the actors present in body and voice their non-Anglo ethnicity, not "representing" particular ethnicities in detention, but certainly displaying via accent and skin colour etc, some of the 'unassimilable' embodiments, (African, Arabic) many still have trouble fully embracing as part of the Australian 'we'. The effect was however to suggest that if not the kind of oppression peculiar to detention centres, these people had experience of the way some in Australia treat the visibly "other". The absence of a dramatic narrative allowed the refugee voices transmitted via their words in the letters their full force as direct contact with them. Even in the variety of their responses to the circumstances of detention, as well as in the underlying similarities in their situation as sensate humans subjected to massive deprivation of normal sociality ,let alone visible justice or hospitality, the play of voices embodied alterity in itself. In this sense the play itself and was able to assist to bear witness, as many of the individual writers wished to do in their letters.

Purgatory Down Under. By Jon Williams and Stephen Klinder. This play was written for the small pub venue located in the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Darlinghurst in inner-city Sydney. The audience here was one made up of predominantly young people consciously attending an 'alternative' venue, individuals presumably sympathetic to refugees. *Purgatory Down Under* is a quasi-naturalistic allegory set on the fictional 'Purgatory Island' half-way between the Hell of the high seas and Paradise (arrival in Australia). It features two guards 'Mike and Mal', a comic duo representing the Federal government's refugee qualification regime, who confront refugees with surreal qualification tests, absurd refugee categories and Catch-22 legal hoops. The refugees are trapped in a limbo state subjected to absurd tests, clinging to the false hope that they are dealing with rational and humane people. Instead they face an irrational regime applying demeaning and deceptive tests (example: English Dictation test ; Write the words 'I am a convicted criminal and have fled my country to escape punishment'). The audience sees all this through the eyes of Dante, a refugee pictured as the reasonable, puzzled decent and tragic person who has lost his wife and children in civil strife and who resolutely tries to take these people seriously. One by one we see various people who fail the test sent back to Hell.

The buffoonish guards Mike and Mal perform a series of comic routines as they put their refugee/asylum seeker charges, through a series of tests designed to find reasons to reject them and send them back to hell on the high seas. During these exchanges the duo keep up a familiar style of Aussie comic patter as they cynically conduct surreal visa application sessions and ignore the struggle of the refugees to communicate their tragic stories without adequate English. The double-act of the two guards can easily be read intertextually in the tradition of other Ozzie comic double-acts, from Paul Hogan and 'Strop' to Roy Slaven and HG Nelson. However, much we laugh at aspects of such duos, in the end they do stand for us, for cherished aspects of how we think we are as Australians. Perhaps our laughter risks being indulgent to Mike and Mal rather than indignant but at the same time the underlying structure of exclusionary solidarity coded into Aussie mateship becomes acutely apparent and painful to acknowledge.

The idealised refugee character Dante's interactions with Mike and Mal provides both for the display of comic misunderstandings and to show the Dante wants to communicate between the groups, between the cultures and is balked by the Aussies having no real desire to understand anything about the refugees at all. The refugees, especially Dante are presented as intelligent, sensitive, suffering and decent, the guards as comically crude and uneducated. Artemia, one of the female refugees, even recites a poem by Rimbaud in French to the guards

The aim seems to be to personalise the refugee figures in order to redress the way they have been demonised as alien, uncivilised, 'offensive to our sensitivities'. However, it should not be necessary to make the refugee figures exceptionally noble or more intelligent or educated than the guards, or more culturally sensitive, or whatever. According to a Levinasian ethics the Other does not need to qualify in any particular way to have a claim on us. It is their existence as destitute and their situation as appealing for asylum which enjoins upon us to provide for them, and indeed to provide for them decently, whatever their attractiveness or otherwise to us. Narratively-based dramaturgies are also based in a particular kind of "knowing", of authorial and spectator omniscience. Rather than keeping open the space of indeterminacy to stand against the closedness of the government's language, certain kinds of characterisation and certain strategies of narrativisation tend to provide an audience with a sense of secure knowing, of "understanding", which is literally less "productive" of thought and reflection. In Levinasian terms, comprehension or knowing about a person entails a form of distance from them.

Two Brothers. Hannie Rayson's fictional political thriller *Two Brothers* played in mainstream theatre venues in Melbourne and Sydney and created a major controversy based on the alleged similarity of the situation of staging a contrast between one (idealistic) brother and another ambitious and ruthless one and the Federal Treasurer Peter Costello and his clergyman and charity CEO brother Tim. Hannie Rayson's play is 'political' in staging a conflict of value positions around the refugee issue somewhat parallel to the differences in position between the actual two brothers ,and it is traditional in form in that, and in centring on a melodramatically heightened moral conflict with the drama depending on the outcome of choices by centred characters. The two main points of interest for us are that the moral-conflict drama is about the sinking of the fictional vessel Kelepesan and the violent murder of the sole survivor. But at the heart of the play also, is the son of the politician character, a young officer in the Royal Australian in the Navy – his moral dilemma concerns his complicity as serving officer in the tragedy. The substance of the naval

involvement is obscure, perhaps because the facts are in indeed as yet unknown, but there is a strong sense of something to answer for, in the young man's sense of guilt.

In ***Two Brothers*** the encounter with the other (alterity) is violently refused. In the Prologue to the play the future Prime Minister of Australia violently knifes Hazem Al Hyad the sole surviving refugee from the Kelepasan. It is a violent shocking scene that haunts the rest of the play, a disturbing emblem of the negation of the other inherent in government policy towards refugees and asylum seekers. Act One shows how we arrived at this place. The denouement in Act Two is devastating as one by one the characters whom we might have expected to act ethically and expose the Prime Minister in waiting cave in for a variety of reasons (expedient, pragmatic, personal – to keep a son out of jail, a refusal to betray his father, etc.) In this dystopian play set in a not too far distant future, there would seem to be a total refusal of Levinasian ethics; everyone in the play is compromised. It is perhaps only the audience who is offered a place to respond ethically to the other so violently negated in Scene 1. The most shocking thing in this dystopic vision of the thuggery of the current situation remains the violent murder of the refugee. His murder is a concentrated emblem of the violence of the whole policy against refugees. It challenges the audience to consider the violence of government refugee policy, the violence of its results on the lives of refugees including perhaps the deaths of hundreds of people. The murder of Hazem is a powerful metaphor of violence and the complicity of the bystander, that is, us. ***Two Brothers*** may have provided a special challenge to mainstream audiences more closely connected by class affiliation to the structures of power. The play –and the author personally- were savaged by conservative commentators in the Melbourne press, as slandering Australian Defence personnel (and Liberal voters) and, amongst other things, departing culpably from factual reality.

Conclusion.

It is Levinas idea of the active encounter with alterity that is so pertinent to ethical possibilities of performance. I would like to close the paper by re-iterating Levinas' words regarding our responsibility for the Other and to suggest that performance is uniquely situated to embody and facilitate this.

[…]I say, in *Otherwise Than Being,* that responsibility is initially a *for the Other*...I analyse the inter-human relationship as, in proximity with the Other….his face, the expressiveness in the Other (and the whole human body is more or less face) were what ordains me to serve him… '(Levinas, 1985, 96-97)

Works Cited.

Critchley, Simon. 1992. The Ethics of Deconstruction. Oxford: Blackwell.
Diprose, Ros. 2003. 'The hand that writes community in blood', Cultural Studies Review, Vol. 9, No. 1.
Ettinger, Brache. 1997,'Qui dirait Eurydice? What would Eurydice say ?'-Brache Lichtenberg Ettinger in conversation with Emmanuel Levinas. Paris: BLE Atelier
Joinet, Louis. 2002. Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on its visit to Australia. (p. 18) United Nations Commission on Human Rights. E/CN.4/2003/8/Add.2.
Kevin, Tony. 2004. A Certain Maritime Incident- the sinking of the SIEV X, Carlton North, Victoria : Scribe Publications.
Klinder, Stephen and Jon Williams. Purgatory Down Under. Playscript, (unpublished).
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1985. Ethics and Infinity, trans. R.A. Cohen. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1981. Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. A Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1979. Totality and Infinity. Trans. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
Miller, Paul. 2004. 'Truth Overboard: What does it mean for Politicans and Statesmen to Assume Responsibility for their words of Mass Destruction,' Borderlands e-journal. Vol. 3, No. 1.
Rayson, Hannie. 2005. Two Brothers. Sydney: Currency Press.
Robbins, Jill. 1999. Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
Shafei, Shahein. 2002.Refugitive. Playscript (unpublished)
Sidetrack Performance Group. 2003. Citizen X-Letters from Refugees. Brisbane : Australasian Drama Studies Journal, Issue 41.